

August 2004
Washington, D.C.

Lessons from the Iraq War and Its Aftermath
by
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It is a painful and disturbing process, but America and everyone involved in the decision-making and oversight process (The Executive Branch and Congress) must learn from the errors and failures related to waging a war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the aftermath of that war. The toll in American military casualties and those of civilians, physical damages caused, financial resources spent, and the damage to the support and image of America abroad, all demand such an assessment and accounting.

Certainly, all the facts and impacts are not yet apparent, and the violence and financial and diplomatic costs of the Iraqi aftermath continue to accumulate. However, I must give this account before I leave Congress on August 31, 2004.

Apparent Intelligence Failures

The first, and most basic, conclusion is that it appears there was a massive failure or misinterpretation of intelligence concerning the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs and supply stocks of Saddam, both by the American agencies and leading decision-makers, but also on the part of allies and other leading countries.

The fact that Saddam had used chemical weapons against Iran and Iraqi Kurds, that chemical weapons and biological and nuclear development programs were discovered after the first Gulf War, and that Saddam so strenuously resisted unfettered international inspection efforts in recent years, all contributed to the general conclusion that he had reconstructed his chemical weapons stock, and was weaponizing biological agents. There was also the suspicion that his efforts to surreptitiously import certain dual-use technology were part of an effort to reconstitute his nuclear development program. The conclusion generally reached was that he had at least some of these types of WMD and that he would use them again against countries of the neighborhood. Even more directly troubling to America was the concern that he would share them with terrorist groups. It was a combination of these conclusions and fears that were the primary justification for pre-emptive military action against Iraq. Most importantly, however, it was the fear that his WMD would be shared with terrorists when it served his purposes. These concerns caused this Member of Congress to vote to authorize the use of military force by the President, even pre-emptive military force, if the conditions specified in House Joint Resolution 114 of October 2002, were judged by the President to have been met. That resolution which authorized the use of military force was passed by large majorities in both houses of Congress, and I believe that for most Members the element of a WMD-terrorist link was a key factor.

Evidence that substantial Iraqi chemical and biological WMD stocks existed at the time the war began or that they covertly had been destroyed just before the conflict began still may be discovered. Certainly, there were such chaotic conditions after the “military war” ended, with huge weapons dumps and laboratories left unguarded or undiscovered for months, that evidence and supplies could have been hidden or destroyed.

However, revelations in the unredacted portions of reports recently released by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence point to a massive intelligence failure by the American and foreign intelligence agencies, and even more disturbingly, leave unresolved whether inadequate or questionable elements of intelligence and sources of intelligence were used to justify military action. (Many Members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, on which I serve, have also reached some of the same conclusions as the Senate Committee – and that includes me.)

Knowing now what I know about the reliance on the tenuous or insufficiently corroborated intelligence used to conclude that Saddam maintained a substantial WMD arsenal, I believe that launching the pre-emptive military action was not justified. However, the inability of the Administration to clearly establish a link between al Qaeda and Saddam, despite the intimations of various Administration leaders like Vice President Dick Cheney, is no surprise to me. In my Floor statement of October 8, 2002, during the debate on the “military use of force” resolution, I said “the Administration cannot yet present incontrovertible evidence of a link between al Qaeda and Saddam.”

Skewing of Intelligence to Justify the War?

Of course, one of the major controversies yet remaining is whether key individuals in the Administration skewed the intelligence made available to them to justify military action against Saddam’s Iraq or, whether coerced, intimidated, or sympathetic American intelligence analysts and managers gave them the findings they seemed to want in order to justify military action. The Senate Select Intelligence Committee report finds no evidence of such pressure and I do not believe that individual Members of the House Committee have such evidence. Left unresolved for now, is whether intelligence was intentionally misconstrued to justify military action. That would be difficult to determine definitively without “a smoking gun.”

Preparations for War and the Aftermath

Here, I first refer you to an attached excerpt from my Floor statement during the October 8, 2002, debate on House Joint Resolution 114. You will note that I raised four questions of the Administration illustrative of additional questions that could be asked, in an attempt to determine whether “the Executive Branch had given adequate consideration and provided contingency planning and resources” for a military action against Iraq and

its aftermath, and if not, to stimulate such consideration before any military action was taken against Iraq. I can only conclude now that it failed on questions #1, #3, and #4.

I was very interested to read Paul Krugman's column in the *New York Times* of April 23, 2004, because his words, which follow, succinctly mirrored my own thoughts:

Just as experts on peacekeeping predicted before the war, the invading force was grossly inadequate to maintain postwar security. And this problem was compounded by a chain of blunders: doing nothing to stop the postwar looting, disbanding the Iraqi Army, canceling local elections, appointing an interim council dominated by exiles with no political base and excluding important domestic groups.

The lessons of the last few weeks are that the occupation has never recovered from those early errors. The insurgency, which began during those early months of chaos, has spread.

Of course, that insurgency has grown dramatically since Krugman wrote those words in April. While the American military deaths have declined from the highest levels of April and May during the U.S. offensive against the terrorists, there still were an average of a tragic fifty U.S. military deaths per month at the time this is being written.

It should be noted, too, that the Administration received many warnings not to make those very errors. Perhaps the warning most frequently given by reputable sources was to avoid disbanding the Iraqi army, but to instead immediately reconstitute it. Many of those Iraqi Army personnel became insurgents or, at best, disenchanted. Now that an army and police forces are being trained and deployed, they are targets for the organized and increasingly motivated insurgency. The same is the case for the Iraqis who have assumed leadership roles at the national or local level; that violence has intensified since the "hand-over" in late June.

In my view, another fundamental and predictable failure was placing the responsibility for reconstruction and interim governance in the hands of the Department of Defense. The State Department, and particularly its Agency for International Development, would no doubt have handled these responsibilities more expeditiously and economically, and with less questionable procurement and contractual practices. These are responsibilities normally assigned to State, and it has a better experience base for such programs.

Finally, I would reiterate the frequent criticism that the American and coalition forces were inadequate in number to take effective control of Iraq when the initial military action was completed. This was a misjudgment from the top levels of the Defense Department and contrary to the estimates of the former U.S. Army Chief of Staff

who was sharply criticized by the DOD civilian leadership. Of course, that inadequacy was accentuated by both the unexpected rejection by Turkey for the movement of one U.S. Army division across that country to enter northern Iraq and by the unwillingness of a number of European countries to supply troops for the coalition because of their opposition to the war.

The Middle East neighborhood and the rest of the world is no doubt safer from attack and subversion now that Saddam has been removed from power. The oppressed Kurdish and Shiite Iraqis no longer have to fear for their lives from his government, and the same is true of other Iraqis whom he punished as enemies of the state.

Was the pre-emptive military strike to remove Saddam in America's best interest? That is a question that receives a sharply divided response in our country with the trend being against the pre-emptive military action we launched. I've reached the conclusion, retrospectively, now that the inadequate intelligence and faulty conclusions are being revealed, that all things being considered, it was a mistake to launch that military action, especially without a broad and engaged international coalition. The cost in casualties is already large and growing, and the immediate and long-term financial costs are incredible. Our country's reputation around the world has never been lower and our alliances are weakened. From the beginning of the conflict it was doubtful that we for long would be seen as liberators, but instead increasingly as an occupying force. Now we are immersed in a dangerous, costly mess and there is no easy and quick way to end our responsibilities in Iraq without creating bigger future problems in the region and, in general, in the Muslim world.